

FOREVER WILD AND FREE

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Though the horse family is endangered world wide, wild horses and burros on public land remain on the very bottom of the totem pole of priorities of both the Bureau of Land Management & U.S. Forest Service. These are the two agencies charged by law with protecting & managing them. These two “national heritage species,” have rights to live free that are covered by the unanimously passed Public Law 92-195 and that are supported by many millions of ordinary U.S. citizens as well as people worldwide. For these and other sundry reasons, the extent of livestock grazing and the number of permittees involved both in the original Herd Areas and in reduced Herd Management Areas should be clearly spelled out to the public – but this is not currently the case!

Livestock, big game, and other overlapping uses as these occur within the wild equid Herd Areas and Herd Management Areas should be clearly incorporated into the federal government’s National Integrated Land System (NILS) data retrieval program. This incorporates most of the other land designations such as wilderness, mining claims, livestock allotments, etc. The exclusion of wild horse and burro areas seems to be an intentional cover-up for the grossly unfair treatment that the wild horses and burros are receiving. Last spring a top BLM official plainly told me that virtually all of the wild horse and burro Herd Areas (HA’s) and Herd Management Areas (HMA’s) were leased to livestock grazers. From a close examination of the original 1971 wild horse and burro Herd Areas in relation to overlapping livestock grazing leases, I estimate that over 95% of these original legal areas are being grazed by livestock. Likewise for the administratively reduced Herd Management Areas still occupied by scant equid herds, I estimate that over 98% of these legal areas are being grazed by livestock. This is all the more objectionable given that 36% of the original Herd Areas have been reduced in setting up these Herd Management Areas (**See Table 1 and accompanying Chart**).

Original Herd Areas total 53,444,499 acres of which 42,099,454 acres are BLM and 11,345,045 acres are USFS. But reduced Herd Management Areas total 34,441,150 acres of which 29,082,217 acres are BLM and 5,358,933 are USFS. These figures reveal that BLM has reduced its equid-occupied areas by 7,658,302, or 18%, while the USFS has reduced its equid-occupied areas by 5,986,112 acres, a whopping 53%! And this situation is even more exacerbating when each Herd Area and Herd Management Area is more closely analyzed to reveal the large-scale displacement of the wild equids that has occurred even within these pared down legal areas. HA’s and HMA’s throughout the West, such as in the Spring Range of southern Nevada (Las Vegas BLM Field Office) and the High Rock area of NW Nevada, reveal that both livestock and big game are being given entire preference both within the original HA’s and, even more flagrantly, within the greatly reduced HMA’s. While forage and water are rarely an issue for the established livestock and big game interests, these same resources are almost always portrayed as being too little for the relatively tiny members of our nation’s remaining wild horses and

burros – who are too often scapegoated for ecological destruction caused ultimately by man. **My overall analysis reveals an effective displacement of the wild equids from at least three fourths of the public lands to which they are legally entitled as the “principal” presences for which to be managed.** These HA’s were supposed to be determined by where these equids were found at the passage of Public Law 92-195 – and I take this to mean not just the tiny portion of ground they stood on at the exact hour and date of the Act’s passage, but rather the home ranges of all the bands of every herd throughout the BLM/USFS West that was then occupied on a year-round basis.

By taking the total number of livestock permittees on the public lands and proportioning this number relative to the percent of public lands that are original wild horse and burro herd areas or reduced herd management areas, I have obtained the following: there are approximately 4,522 livestock permittees grazing their livestock on the original 53,444,499 legal Herd Areas (BLM) or Territories (USFS) today. This represents 20.6%, or about 1/5th of the livestock permittees on BLM and USFS lands. However since the occupied HMA’s are much smaller than the original HA’s, there are approximately 2,914 permittees grazing their livestock on the reduced 34,441,150 acres in herd management areas/territories today. This represents only 13%, or about 1/8th of the grazing permittees.

Of the 4,522 livestock permittees having to originally share the land they graze – by privilege not right – with wild horses and burros, 1,612, or 36%, now no longer have to share. Our public servants have already eliminated the wild horses and burros from the grazing allotments of approximately 36% of the public lands in spite of the legal right of the horses and burros to live there. This lopsided situation is a betrayal of both the wild horses and burros, and the substantial public represented by millions of U.S. citizens who count upon their public servants to uphold just what this unanimously passed law of the land actually means and intends.

It would be fair to approach the relatively small number of permittees involved, with the proposal that they reduce or, if possible, even eliminate their livestock within the legal herd areas. This would enable the establishment of truly long-term viable and stable populations as is consistent with the original intent of the Act. In exchange, these permittees could be offered priority treatment for wild horse/burro public tour franchises that could be combined with vigilance of the herds and their habitat as is consistent with the purposes of the Act. Of necessity, this program would have to be closely monitored.

A proposal by the late Nancy Whittaker who worked for the Animal Protection Institute (as did I) was to have the federal government issue conservation, in lieu of grazing, permits in the legal wild horse/burro herd areas, as in other land categories such as wilderness. The wild horse-supporting public could bid on these with the aim of freeing the herd areas of competing livestock, especially where in excess, among other conflictive interests. -- I’m sure millions of people would jump at this chance to help reinstate the wild horses and burros in their legal areas! This proposal should be pursued by administrative and, if necessary, Congressional means.

The miniscule percentage of the U.S. population ranching on Western public lands is slightly over one hundredth of one percent; and the percentage of all U.S. livestock feed, including crops, pastures, and range forage, supplied by BLM and USFS lands is only ca. 2%. But this 2% comes at a great economic and even more enormous ecological cost, a cost estimated as at least one half billion dollars annually. -- Yet who can put a price tag on the ecological health of Mother Earth upon which the future of life depends?!

Forage consumption by livestock on BLM land amounted to nearly 7 million [6,835,458] Animal Unit Months [AUM's] in fiscal year 2005. This contrasted with the mere 381,120 AUM's worth of forage that was consumed by wild horses and burros. These equids consumed only 5.3% of the total consumed by both livestock and wild equids. This percentage is lower still when forage consumed by big game animals is considered. I estimate this would bring the figure down to between one and two percent of the forage available on the BLM lands of the lower 48 states, especially considering the priority treatment given to state fish and game agencies by the federal government.

This disparity is even greater on Forest Service lands where livestock devour 6.6 million AUM's per year yet wild horses and burros annually eat a mere 32,592 AUM's. This is the equivalent of only 2,716 wild horses or burros grazing year round. In other words, on Forest Service lands, wild equids consume less than 1/2 of one percent of what livestock consume. Combined with the Forest Service's 53% reduction of original equid herd areas, this reveals to just what an outlandish extent the Forest Service is "death on wild horses and burros!" Its negative policy is currently reflected in the Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Refuge, the last occupied wild horse herd area in Montana, a state where the feds have eliminated all wild horses from 83% of their several original herd areas. Here, true to form, Custer National Forest officials are refusing to acknowledge that the unique Pryor Mountain Spanish mustangs have a legitimate right to live in an area they occupied at the passage of the 1971 Act.

Livestock are often allowed to strip the very most nutritious forage, during a few months to a half year, often in the spring or early summer. This leaves what remains in the way of forage for wildlife, including wild horses, to fend on as best they can. Less mobile than wild horses and burros, livestock, especially cattle, concentrate their grazing pressures in and along species-rich stream, marsh, or lakeshore habitats known as riparian, which I have monitored for the BLM. Cattle and sheep have destroyed these riparian habitats on such a large scale that they have become directly responsible for the extinction or near extinction of literally thousands of plant and animal species in the U.S. and worldwide. Wild horses, on the other hand, tend not to linger at watering sites or along riparian areas except when forced to do so. They disperse their grazing pressure much more broadly in the arid to semi-arid West; and, as a consequence, greatly reduce dry parched vegetation. Their post-gastric digestive system is perfectly suited to taking advantage of this coarser forage, which does not consume as much metabolic energy in its breakdown when compared with ruminant grazers: cattle, sheep, deer, elk, etc. Their digestion also favors the dispersal of the seeds of many native plant species that are not as degraded in passing through their digestive tracts as compared with ruminants. This

concerns species that have in many cases co-evolved for millions of years with horses and even burro-like asses, developing many mutually beneficial symbioses in the process.

Given the length of time they have evolved here, it would be blind not to recognize the great importance of equids in the North American ecosystem. I call this the equid element, or component, that fits in like a missing piece in some gigantic jig-saw puzzle. Yet government personnel persist in maintaining that wild horses do not warrant native wildlife designation. I suggest they visit one of our fine national monuments by the name of Hagerman Horse Fossil in Idaho. Here they can take the time to see for themselves and carefully consider the abundant paleontological evidence that establishes the horse family, genus, and even modern-day species, *Equus caballus*, as among the most truly native in North America, for most deeply and anciently rooted and of longest evolutionary duration here. The horse is a returned native species; and the burro has substantial evolutionary roots in North America. But these proven facts concerning our two national heritage species are rarely acknowledged by the BLM and USFS officials who are legally charged with their protection, and when so only begrudgingly and in a way designed to minimize their relevance.

To me it seems the height of ingratitude that of all the species upon which humans inflict their prejudice and spite, it should be the horse and burro that bear the brunt of their attacks! These are species whose members have performed such a world of service for mankind over, not just centuries, but approximately seven millennia! In the broader horizon of Time, their truer place among Life's unfolding family on Earth has been and presently remains *in the wild*, and particularly here in North America where the vast majority of their evolutionary past history was experienced over many millions of years and with practically no break right up to the present.

In the freedom of the wilds, the true vigor of any race or species is preserved! We owe this freedom to the magnificent horses and wise burros on the land that gave them birth. Given sufficient freedom in space and time, they prove that the equid element both restores and enhances the ecosystem here in North America, as elsewhere. But these animals must be allowed to fill their natural niche in a habitat of sufficient size in order to become long-term viable, stabilized populations, as befits the "ecological climax species" they are. We have not really given the horse this chance since the early to mid 19th Century, though many studies have revealed an increase in native biodiversity in areas where they have dwelled for generations. This includes southeastern California's Coyote Canyon Wild Horse Herd Area located on BLM land, but from which, lamentably, all of the distinctive, Spanish descended mustangs have recently been removed! Seed dispersal and soil building through added humus (both performed by means of fecal deposition) count among the primary ways in which this enhancement is achieved. And there are many others I could describe given the time (rolling swales as water catchments; accessing food and water by hoof action both for themselves and other species both in summer and in winter, preventing animals from perishing in winter/summer, prey, etc.).

-- I am very concerned for the approximate 30,000 mainly wild horses but some burros who have been over-gathered and now languish in government holding areas and for

whom euthanasia has recently been proposed by BLM officials as a convenient way of solving the crisis they themselves have created. And I strongly urge that these animals be restored to their empty or nearly empty -- but still legal -- Herd Areas throughout the West. This is the only honorable course of action, and we owe it to them!

I have performed a calculation of the numbers that could be restored based on the various sizes of the legal Herd Areas. Though just the empty Herd Areas in Nevada and Wyoming alone could accommodate the 30,000, I recommend that these equids be used to restore more viable herds throughout all the 10 Western states from which they have been unfairly depleted. However, care should be taken to restore the wild equids to their original Herd Areas wherever possible, or if not possible, to Herd Areas as close by to their natal grounds or with as similar habitat types, climates and other conditions as is again possible. Availability of water, forage, shelter and other habitat requirements, of course, should also be considered -- and our public servants must learn to stand up to the wild horses' and burros' enemies in securing such vital resources, including summering and wintering grounds and the corridors between these.

Table 2 & chart indicate by state where and in what numbers wild horses and burros could be released into already emptied Herd Areas or into HA's/HMA's that contain too few wild equids and whose numbers should be bolstered for greater viability.

In Arizona, 540 wild burros, 35 wild horses proportionally among 8 herd areas according to area size, AML, species designation and habitat factors such as water and forage.
In California, 303 wild burros into 2 herd areas and 2005 wild horses into 13 herd areas.
In Colorado, 659 wild horses into 7 herd areas/herd management areas.
In Idaho, 81 wild horses into 4 herd areas/herd management areas.
In Montana, 294 wild horses into 6 herd areas.
In Nevada, 5,200+ wild horses into 31 herd areas/herd management areas.
In New Mexico 166 wild horses into 3 herd areas/herd management areas.
In Oregon 2,240 wild horses & 10 wild burros into 28 herd areas/herd management areas.
In Utah, 1,085 wild horses and 17 wild burros into 18 herd areas/herd management areas.
In Wyoming, 7,425 wild horses into 29 herd areas/herd management areas, 22 of which are zeroed out and 7 below AML.
Totals: **19,190** wild horses and **870** wild burros for total **20,060** wh/b's in **149** ha/hma's.

Many of the additional approximately 10,000 government-held wild equids could easily be accommodated by assigning just AML's to the zeroed-out herd areas. These would be proportional to the size of such as well as water and other resource availability. Also by increasing ludicrously low AML's that are disproportionate to the size and resource availability of the original HA's, many of the excessively gathered wild equids could be further accommodated as is shown in **Table 2 and Chart:**

Arizona (15% reduction): 1,000 wild burros/horses;
California (65% reduction): 5,000 wild horses/burros;
Colorado (45% reduction): 1,000 wild horses;
Idaho (12% reduction): 1,000 wild horses;

Montana (83% reduction): 1,000 wild horses;
Nevada (23% reduction): 4,310 wild horses/burros;
New Mexico (77% reduction): 334 wild horses;
Oregon (32% reduction): 1,750 wild horses/burros;
Utah (28% reduction): 1,085 wild horses;
Wyoming (53% reduction): 2,575 wild horses.

Total: 19,054 wild equids

Additional numbers that could be released into the 10 Western states sum to 19,054 wild equids, chiefly horses with some burros. Summing to the earlier figure, **a total of 39,114 wild equids should and easily could be reinstated into their rightful legal herd areas on federal lands throughout the West administered by the BLM.** This is over 9,000 more than the ca. 30,000 wild equids currently being held. And this evaluation does not take a hard look at the Forest Service's original wild equid territories, many but not all of which have been relegated to the BLM for management. Since the Forest Service has reduced horse or burro occupation in their original legal herd areas by 5,986,112 acres, or 53%, it could easily restore many wild horses and burros to these empty by still legal areas throughout the West -- provided the political will to do so!

Unfairness towards America's last wild horses and burros follows a long tradition that includes other scapegoats such as the buffalo, the wolf, the bear, the prairie dog and the Indian himself. **Table 1 & Charts** indicate the national 36% reduction from the original herd areas to herd management areas and that four states have eliminated wild equids from over 50% of their original herd areas: California – 65%, Montana – 83%, New Mexico – 77%, and Wyoming – 54%.

The number of acres per remaining or planned individual wild horse or burro reveals the gross inequity. **Please take note that our public servants have allowed for only one currently surviving wild horse or burro in the wild for every 1,871 acres of original legal Herd Areas established by the Act. And in the greatly reduced Herd Management Areas, there are currently only 1,206 acres per surviving wild equid!** One entire football field is closely equal to just one acre. Since these figures were published by BLM in early 2008, this agency has further reduced the herds by several thousand in order to establish the non-viable so-called **Appropriate Management Levels that would leave 1,253 acres, or football fields, of Herd Management Areas per individual wild horse and burro!** This is the near equivalent of leaving one wild equid for every livestock permittee, each having 100's or even 1,000's of livestock grazing upon the public lands!

BLM planned on leaving only 27,492 wild horses and burros nationwide as of spring, 2008, though their current total was only 28,563, of which 2,874 were burros and 25,689 were wild horses. This is close to the population level of pronghorn antelope that survived in the early part of the last, i.e. 20th, century after sustaining wholesale carnage and plunder by European settlers. The pronghorn's low population level, ca. 26,000, was considered just cause for declaring the species to be endangered with extinction and warranting immediate action by authorities to save it. Obviously our two national

heritage species are not so valued, since they are being set up for just such a low or much lower levels. Again, the phrase “managing for extinction” comes to mind, both for the wild horses and ten times more for the wild burros! By the way, field studies have proven that wild horses actually help pronghorn antelope through mutualistic symbioses.

As a wild horse and burro appreciating ecologist, I envision self-contained reserves both in and around the originally established Herd Areas, including where possible other appropriate areas on both private and public lands. Through ecologically knowledgeable reserve design that takes into account as many of the short- and long-term needs of the wild equids as possible, drastic roundups could be avoided, or at least greatly minimized. This will be accomplished by incorporating into reserve design natural boundaries such as high mountains or cliffs that limit the equids’ movements and, only where necessary, by the construction of artificial, semi-permeable equid barriers that allow other species of wildlife to pass through unharmed. It will also be accomplished through judiciously freeing up water sources for the herds. Crucial to this plan is that each reserve contain appropriate habitat of sufficient size to support a long-term viable wild horse or burro population of, I recommend, around 1,000 interbreeding individuals. Within each such natural sanctuary, the wild equids will be respectfully treated as the “principal” presence, not relegated to mere token numbers and deprived of basic resources in order to accommodate a monopoly of livestock and/or big game, as is currently the case! In these equid reserves, natural checks and balances will be allowed to operate, including natural predators of equids such as the puma and the wolf. With relative rapidity, the herds will attain population stability as part of a special, harmonious give-and-take relationship within each unique occupied ecosystem. And the cruel & ecologically disruptive roundups that have tragically set back the site-specific adaptiveness of the West’s magnificent wild horse & burro populations will become a thing of the past! Thank God!

-- Though the horse is a quickly reverting, returned native wildlife species in North America, complementing many native plants and animals, and though he greatly reduces flammable vegetation, thus preventing catastrophic fires, of mounting “global warming” concern today, he is still perversely branded and treated as a destructive exotic by federal and state officials, livestock and hunter, among other bias, interests. The burro species is a member of the ass branch of the horse family, Equidae, which branch had its origin and long-standing evolutionary development in North America. It refills an empty niche that was occupied by very similar species in the drier areas of the West and not that long ago, geologically speaking. Both horse and burro successfully disperse the seeds of many native plants and help build water-retentive and nutritive soils through their feces. Upon these wild equids so much of the native North American ecosystem depends. **Beneath these sunny and starry skies and given sufficient time and space and freedom, all individuals of all species – including wild horses and burros -- ever move forth in marvelous conjunction!**

“With nostrils flared and mane flying, the horse is an image of beauty and grace with an undying spirit!” Although briefly domesticated by man, its awe-inspiring, multi-million-year history and destiny remains in the vast, wide-open spaces of the natural biodiverse

and inter-balanced world. But whether corralled or at liberty in the physical, its heart remains its own, *forever wild and free!*
